

## Government and Religion : Partners for Change

by  
Lieutenant Governor Loren Leman

By any objective measure, the social welfare system of the past 40 years has fallen short of its original purpose. During this time, the United States spent more than \$7 trillion on human service programs, yet saw a rise in illegitimate births of 500 percent; an increase in violent crime rates of 300 percent; and a tripling of the number of children on welfare rolls.

The record in Alaska should concern us, also. Despite spending almost \$2 billion each year on social programs, corrections and public safety, alcohol abuse is far too high—we lead the nation in Fetal Alcohol Syndrome/Fetal Alcohol Effect births. Violent crime, domestic violence and sexual abuse continue to plague us. Our prisons are full.

With deep roots in Alaska, I am very aware and concerned with generational abuse. Governor Murkowski and I are committed to breaking this cycle of shame.

As Governor of Texas, George W. Bush said, “One person alone cannot do everything. But, one person alone can do something.” Getting started is the key.

We are seeing a shift in focus from compassionate intentions to compassionate results. The decisions by our Legislature and Congress to fundamentally reform our welfare system require an even greater cooperation among government and religiously-based social ministries. In Alaska, the faith and volunteer communities, long a part of our social fabric, are stepping up in new ways.

When I was a freshman member of the State House 14 years ago, I suggested that some of the State-funded social service programs should not primarily be the responsibility of government. Rather we should meet needs individually—as family, friends, neighbors, social groups and churches. That, however, takes personal investment.

I am pleased that Governor Murkowski also shares this vision. He has selected Commissioners and key staff who will focus on how we can better partner with the faith-based and volunteer communities.

Twenty Alaskans from across the State are serving on our Faith-Based and Community Initiatives Task Force. These talented people come from different religious backgrounds; are of a variety of national origins; and

represent a diversity of age and work experience. Although they differ greatly in these respects, they do, however, share a common trait: they are passionate about making this alliance work. The Task Force will hold its first meeting on Wednesday, September 24. Their meeting will be linked telephonically to Legislative Information Offices for interested members of the public to provide input.

We want to encourage new approaches—and more applications of approaches that are already working. Private and religious charities are often more effective and efficient than government at shaping and reclaiming lives. Why?

- Their approach is more personal
- They make the essential connection between responsibility and changed behavior
- They inject a moral and spiritual challenge

Our purpose is not to tell faith and volunteer organizations how to do their jobs. We do not want to assert more government control over them. We do want to identify success stories and celebrate them. We also want to identify what could work better if government would make changes and remove barriers.

By our constitution, State government has a responsibility for providing for the health and welfare of Alaskans. However, it does not have a monopoly on compassion—and it does not have to be the only vehicle for accomplishing that goal.

Alaska has had a long history of cooperation among faith organizations and government. Last year alone more than \$100 million was distributed through 600 contracts with faith and volunteer organizations. Dynamic cooperation, far from offending our principles, supports our time-honored spirit of religious liberty. Religious charities must recognize, however, that when they receive direct public money, accountability must follow.

The challenge to our Task Force, as well as those who form public policy, is how to provide reasonable oversight while respecting religious identity. I believe our First Amendment is clear—government is not to establish a religion or limit its free exercise. However, government should not exclude religious expressions or solutions from the public square.

*Loren Leman is Lieutenant Governor. For more information about Alaska's Faith-Based and Community Initiatives go to [ltgov.ak.us/fbci.php](http://ltgov.ak.us/fbci.php)*